

The Anatomy of the Shooting Spree

Shooting sprees shock us and spark bewilderment and fear. At the **Max Planck Institute for Human Development** in Berlin, a Minerva project is examining the link between possession of firearms, violence and emotions, based on the example of shooting sprees. Historian **Dagmar Ellerbrock** has already addressed the controversial topic of “youth and weapons” in previous studies.

TEXT **ADELHEID MÜLLER-LISSNER**

Whether in Erfurt, Winnenden, Dunblane (UK) or Columbine (USA): shooting sprees shock us – and cry out for explanations. After a carefully prepared, armed attack on a large group of people by a lone assailant, academics in a range of disciplines are regularly confronted by the media, hungry for explanations of such unfathomable events.

Right at the start of our discussion, Dagmar Ellerbrock is careful to curb any expectations that she will provide a quick and comprehensive answer to such questions. While she addresses the topic of shooting sprees in her new project, “Godforsaken, angry or calous? Shooting sprees from a transnational perspective” at the Berlin-based Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Ellerbrock and her research group are taking care not to search for one unifying explanation, a final answer to this long-standing question. Rather than a why, the project poses the question of a very particular – and

in truth also particularly important – how: how are violence and emotions linked in shooting sprees? “We study the topic through the lens of emotion, which no one has ever looked through before,” says Ellerbrock.

TAKING A GUN TO CLASS

A few years ago, Ellerbrock demonstrated with her research on “gun boys” and the German weapons culture of the 19th and early 20th centuries that reading historical sources through this lens is exceptionally fruitful. Her starting point was the alarming news that 8 to 25 percent of German schoolchildren sometimes go to class armed. More often than not, it’s a knife they’re carrying in their pocket. This, at least, is what inquiries following the Winnenden massacre revealed.

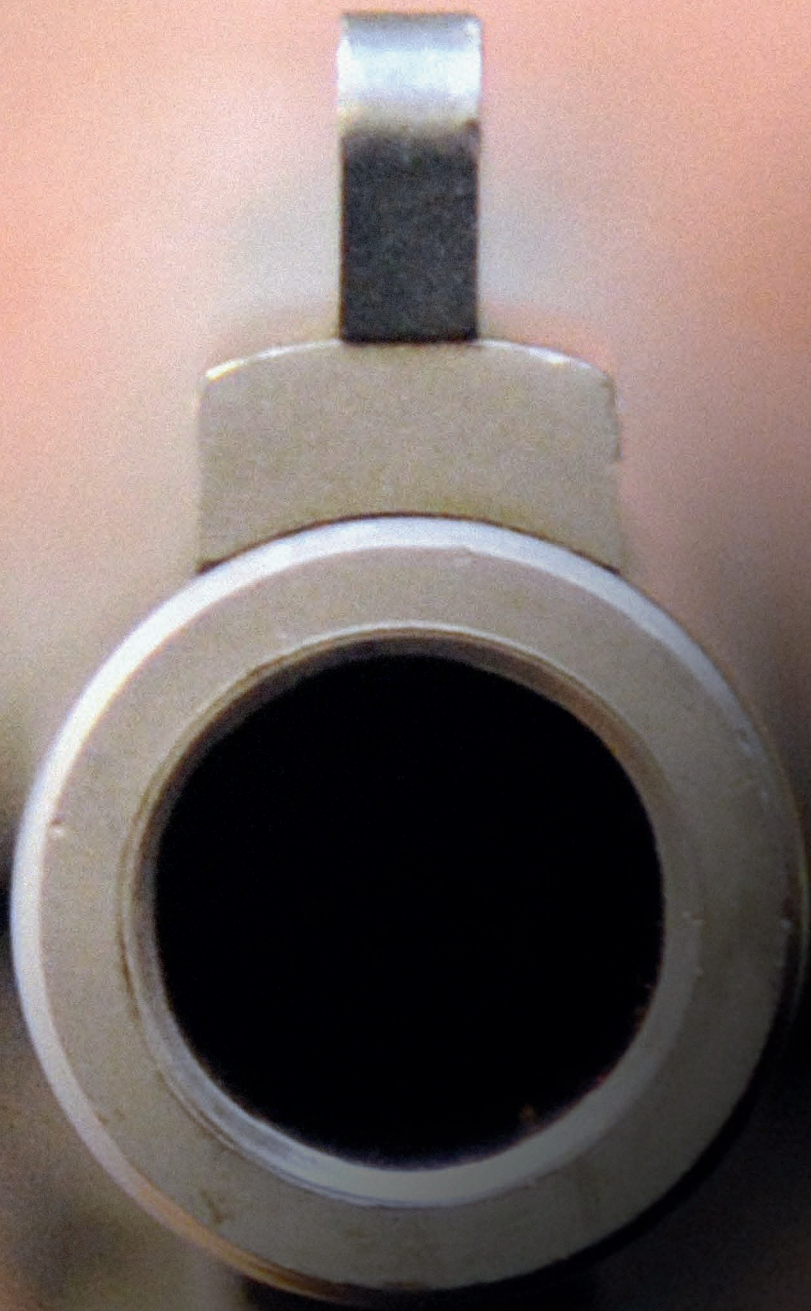
The media was increasingly filled with concerned discussions warning against “American conditions” taking hold in Germany’s classrooms. Would it soon be necessary also in Germany to

convey the message “Don’t bring guns to school!” as did the 1991 song by the American band Little?

But was everything really better back in the day? And are the terrible weapon-carrying trends really coming to us from across the Atlantic? Dagmar Ellerbrock offers a wealth of historical documents that refute both of these positions. It’s not only the students who, in Goethe’s day, didn’t think twice about coming to class with their swords, or the young tradesmen who bought decorated knives and pistols with their first paychecks.

Younger adolescents were clearly carrying firearms in Germany as early as the start of the 19th century: in the Duchy of Coburg, in any case, a decree had to be issued in 1810 prohibiting schoolchildren from using rifles.

For a long time, however, possession of weapons wasn’t prohibited. In the mid-19th century in the state of Württemberg, a speaker for the Ministry of the Interior reassured critics of the prevailing light-touch regulations:



dass das Tra-
gen und der Verkauf von Waffen in Preus-
sen durch Polizeiverordnungen nicht geregelt werden
dürfe und derartige Polizeiverordnun-
gen ungültig seien.

"...that the carrying and the sale of weapons in Prussia may not be regulated by police decree, and that such police decrees are null and void. ..."
Excerpt from a letter from the Attorney General in Hamm to the Minister of Justice in Berlin, 1903

"As concerns young people, it's up to their parents and guardians, and not the state, to keep watch over them." Whether 19th-century pupils in their final school year or scholars and journeymen in the Middle Ages, according to Ellerbrock, it was always the case "that young men carrying weapons was an everyday phenomenon."

The knives, swords and pistols had high emotional significance as highly coveted personal accessories. An expression of maturing manhood and strength, their owners cherished and maintained them well. What changed at the turn to the 20th century, then, were not the emotions and customs of the young men, but rather the potential danger of the new weapons now available to them.

Now automatic pistols like the Browning 1900 were coming onto the market and drawing the covetous glances of minors. "Weapons technology developed rapidly in the last third of the 19th century," explains Ellerbrock. In addition, the possibilities for mass production made the individual object of desire significantly less costly – and also facilitated more effective marketing. One Belgian-produced model of the Browning was, as the historian discovered, even distributed by the caseload to school graduates as a promotional gift – before their parents could intervene.

For Ellerbrock, it was an agonizing experience to hold a specimen of this popular firearm in her own hand. It

was, however, a model that had long ceased to be functional, found at a flea market, completely without ammunition. What feelings did the weapons arouse in the youths at the threshold of adulthood? "For a group of young people at the time, the Browning was a fashion must-have, similar to the iPhone today."

WEAPONS IN CHILDREN'S HANDS – PROHIBITED AFTER THE WAR

Once it had reached this point, the relaxed attitudes of politicians came to an end. There was reason enough for concern, with repeated incidents involving impulsive actions and terrible accidents resulting from inexperienced children handling weapons or inebriated young men having them to hand in the heat of the moment.

The press, too, was now criticizing the fact that every schoolboy was able to procure dangerous weapons and ammunition. Ellerbrock analyzed many newspaper articles from the 1910s. In March 1911, for instance, the *PFÄLZISCHE RUNDschau* asked, "What does a cobbler's apprentice need a revolver for?" and the *MÜNCHNER NEUESTEN NACHRICHTEN* lashed out against "Firearms in the hands of children."

"It was the First World War that changed Germany's relationship to firearms," explains Ellerbrock. But it wasn't until 1928 that the German parliament passed the law on firearms and ammunition – the first law to regulate their

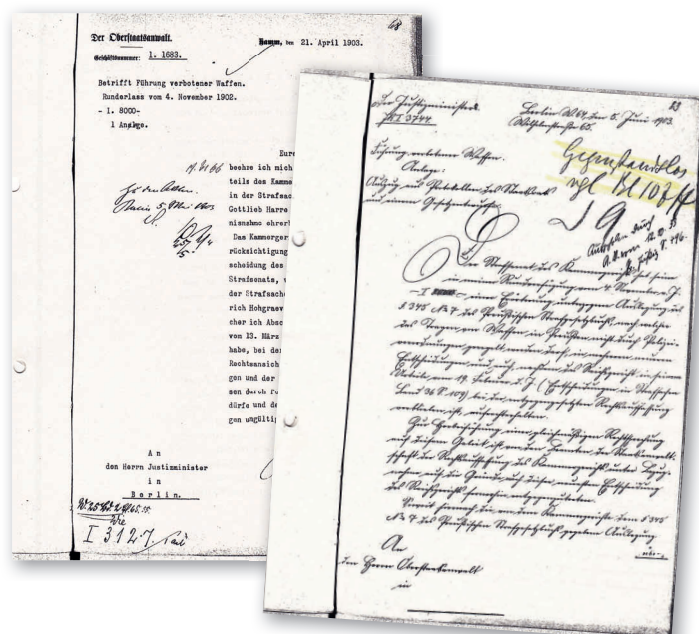
possession and use. After the end of the Second World War, the majority of Germans could no longer fathom how weapons could ever have been associated with positive emotions: the once notoriously trigger-happy nation had changed. Weapons were no longer such a natural symbol of manhood, honor and social distinction.

"A German story of hope," as Dagmar Ellerbrock calls it, cautiously optimistic. "Looking back at the history of weapons in Germany can relieve the unnecessary cultural pessimism toward the current weapons problems at German schools," she writes in a piece for Stephan Rusch's work *Waffen an Schulen* [Weapons in Schools], published in 2011. From her research on the so-called "gun boys" she concludes: "We Germans were at least as armed at the end of the 19th century as the US is today. And neither was everything different nor was everything better back then."

If we look at the problem of killing sprees, however, it's difficult to come to such an assessment. From the German Empire, at least, no reports were passed on of major catastrophic incidents in schools on a par with those in Erfurt in 2002 or Winnenden in 2009. At most, there were the brutal deeds of the Swabian teacher's assistant Ernst August Wagner, who, in 1913, killed his wife and their four children and then went on to set fire to several houses and shot the occupants as they fled. But the man who

top: Official documents from the early 19th century show that, although the "carrying of prohibited weapons" was an issue, it was a rare one; here in connection with victims of the 1911 shooting epidemic resulting from the actions of immature, careless and dependent persons."

bottom: Private photographs show just how normal handling weapons was considered to be: Around 1900, an unknown studio had this young boy pose with a toy gun and an oriental end table; his stern look doesn't fit with the childish paper hat at all.



newspapers of the time called a "mass murderer" was a grown man and father of four. Today's perpetrators are typically between 16 and 25 years old. And the term "amok," a Malay word meaning "attack in a blind rage and kill," was not used at the time, as it is today in the German term for shooting spree, *Amoklauf*.

USING VIOLENCE TO ESCAPE SHAME

If we try to read shooting sprees through the lens of emotion, as Dagmar Ellerbrock aims to do in her new project, then the unhappy family man from Swabia could still provoke an interesting analysis. Wagner reported that he had a penchant for sodomy and thus felt ridiculed by the people around him.

In her project, Dagmar Ellerbrock hopes to address shame as one possible root of shooting sprees, following the approach of sociologist Thomas Scheff from the University of California. He views shame as an important regulator of violence – shame about being different from others, about not conforming to social norms. Shame is also associated with bullying. According to Scheff, shame in particular tends to be kept secret, so that an individual must deal with their problems alone, often leading to anger and rage that spill over into violence.

Scheff advocates seeing people independently of other people's judgments, and independently of those judgments





Mourning following the 2009 massacre in Winnenden: A country searching for an explanation. Historian Dagmar Ellerbrock doesn't just consider the perpetrators – she also looks at the social framework.

that we anticipate in our own thoughts, or that exist merely in our heads. Only in this way can we understand the negative feelings that, in certain cases, can lead to a person running amok. Ellerbrock, too, says that “violence is frequently used to escape such negative emotions.” Since a person’s violent actions in turn determine how others judge them, the perpetrator gets caught in a fatal spiral.

It is initiated by conflicts – with oneself and with others. “For historians, conflicts are always a highly welcome lens. They illuminate predetermined breaking points and the development potential of a society,” explains Ellerbrock. But it is important to see the conflict not only with “ex-post vision” as an unavoidable trigger of violence: “We should also bear in mind other possible outcomes.” Perhaps as the paths by which conflicts can be settled without resorting to violence. “Emotions are important modulators for this. They set the tone and the direction.”

Shooting sprees have always resulted in a great sense of helplessness. “Previously, they were construed as a consequence of godlessness,” says Ellerbrock. The religious interpretation patterns have since been replaced by

psychological and psychiatric ones, but these often focus solely on the perpetrator. One aim of the Minerva research focus on “Emotions, Violence and Peace” is to also embed these hard-to-understand and self-destructive acts of violence in a social framework that has been shaped by history. “We look at the situation – the perpetrator is just one player among many,” says Ellerbrock.

WHOSE FAULT IS IT: LAX GUN LAWS? THE MEDIA?

This is the point at which Ellerbrock was able to tie in her earlier research, which is concerned with the importance of weapons to the society in which both perpetrators and shooting spree victims have grown up. It’s not without reason that calls for stricter gun control laws are heard anew after each killing spree. A comparison at the national level is particularly interesting in this context: in Germany, a tightening of the laws is certainly discussed after each massacre, so far resulting in only minor details having been changed, while in the UK, the response to the events in Dunblane was a drastic tightening of gun control laws.

In this shooting spree, which took place in a Scottish primary school in

1996, 16 children and their teacher lost their lives. At issue in the current Scottish independence movement is a further tightening of these laws. In Germany, in contrast, Ellerbrock sees a permanent influence of the rifle clubs, a strong lobby that opposes such drastic regulations. For her, however, gun control laws aren’t the key to understanding national differences. “Weapons are pervasive in Scandinavia, but still there are hardly any shooting sprees,” she says. This made it all the more sensational when, in July 2012, Norwegian Anders Breivik killed 77 people, mostly teenagers, who were attending a summer camp.

What role does the media play in this structure? Are they partially responsible for turning killing sprees into a modern form of extreme violence in a globalized world? After all, negative heroes can also become role models. “Columbine had a certain exemplary character. Such details as the perpetrators’ clothing and the time of the attack were later copied by other assailants.” In this shooting rampage at the local high school on April 20, 1999, two students killed 13 people and themselves.

This is the point at which the tricky issue of positive feelings comes into play. “Violence leaves traces behind,

» For a group of young people at the time, the Browning was a fashion must-have, similar to the iPhone today.

even in the perpetrator's body," says Ellerbrock. A threshold is evident in "body-contact-oriented" sports, where the boundary between tolerable and illegal attacks is determined by rules, adherence to which is ensured by referees. The overstepping of boundaries, a regular occurrence, can probably be easily explained by the pleasure potential of violence. Hooligans, for instance, could well be characterized as "lusting after violence."

THE WORLD OF EMOTIONS IS TERRA INCOGNITA

Particularly in Germany, the pleasure potential that resides in the "self-empowerment of violence" may be a taboo topic due to its 20th-century history. The Minerva project also examined the acts of violence in the political conflicts that were carried out in the streets during the late Weimar Republic, right before the Nazi Party came to power. One example is the street fights between communists and the motorized SS in the city center of Karlsruhe in 1933.

In analyzing police and witness reports, the Max Planck researchers noticed that the rivals' hate-filled faces were mentioned repeatedly. "Emotions were an important part of the dynamic," says Ellerbrock. The events can't really be understood unless you take into account the difficult situation resulting from the conflict between aggression, excitement, fun, a sense of belonging and solidarity.

For a present-day observer, much of this is difficult to comprehend. Do people from different historical epochs even have the same feelings in the face of violence, or are their feelings shaped

The quaint-sounding attributions might evoke a grin if this weren't advertising for deadly firearms: Elegant waistcoat-pocket format, extra-fine cyclists' revolver, model "Forstbegleiter" ["forest companion"]. August Stukenbrok presented his wide assortment of goods of all kinds in a catalog in 1912. At that time, weapons were popular accessories.

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Kal. 320 = 7 mm, mit Kugel.
1 Schachtel mit 50 St. Mk. 2.—
Länge 14 cm, Gewicht ca. 200 g.

Nr. 7914. Puppy-Revolver.
delegiertes Modell, bessere Qualität, leichtschüssig, Lauf gezogen, Gummihautschwarz, ein ausgeprägter Walzen, Umlegungs- und Seitenverschiebung, Fischhautschäft, Kal. 320 = 7 mm, sehr gangbares Modell. Stück Mk. 7.—

Nr. 7917. Kobold-Revolver.
elegantes Modell, bessere Qualität, leichtschüssig, Lauf gezogen, ausgeglichene Walzen, Gummihautschäft, ein ausgeprägter Walzen, Umlegungs- und Seitenverschiebung, Fischhautschäft, Kal. 320 = 7 mm. Stück Mk. 7.75

Nr. 7936. Extra feiner Radfahrer-Revolver „Gentleman“.
Handliches Modell, 8 schüssig, Gummihautschäft, fein gezogenen Stahllauf, echter Ebenholzschaft mit extra feiner Fischhaut, mit Ring, feinsten Knochenschliff, Einlegeschieß, Kasten fein bunt gezeichnet, Lauf und Walze II blau. Allerbeste Qualität, sauberste Ausarbeitung. Kal. 320 = 7 mm. Stück Mk. 15.—

Nr. 7903. Zentralfeuer-Revolver.
Kleines Modell, 8 schüssig, Gummihautschäft, mit glattem Nulholzschaft, Kal. 320 = 7 mm. Länge 16 cm, Gewicht ca. 300 g. Stück Mk. 3.75

Nr. 7977. Feiner Radfahrer-Hahn-Revolver.
(Westentaschen-Modell) Kal. 22 short = 6 mm, Randfeuer, fein verzierte Gummihautschäft, ein ausgeprägter Walzen, Umlegungs- und Seitenverschiebung, Fischhautschäft, Kal. 320 = 7 mm. Stück Mk. 10.50

Nr. 7932. Zentralfeuer-Revolver.
Kal. 320 = 7 mm, mit eingeschraubtem gezogenen Stahllauf, rückgründig, Hahn, Seitenverschiebung, Umlegungs- und Seitenverschiebung, Fischhautschäft, Kal. 320 = 7 mm, mit Kugel. Zu nebenstehendem Revolver Nr. 7932 passend. Stück Mk. 13.50

Nr. 7933. Hammerleß-Revolver.
Kal. 320 = 7 mm, mit eingeschraubtem gezogenen Stahllauf, Drehverschiebung an der Seite, mit Entlastung zum Drehen, Abzug zum Einlegen, gepolte Hornschalen mit feiner Fischhaut. Alle Teile sind fein schwarz eloxiert, sowie in jeder Beziehung tadellos und sauber ausgearbeitet. Als zuverlässiger, handlicher und bequemer Taschenrevolver ganz besonders zu empfehlen. Stück Mk. 14.—

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Kal. 7: Länge 13 cm, Gewicht 370 g. Kal. 9: Länge 20 cm, Gewicht 530 g.

Nr. 7925. Modell „Forstbegleiter“.
Förster- und Beamten-Revolver in erstklassiger Qualität, mit eingeschraubtem Stahllauf, fein gezogen, Kasten eingepreßt, Lauf und Trommel fein schwarz bronziert (rostfrei), fein ausgeglichene Walzen, Drehverschiebung an der linken Seite, Abzug gelblich, feiner Nulholz- oder Patentschaft mit feiner Fischhaut, in allen Teilen aus bestem Material gefertigt und sehr sauber gearbeitet. Von Förstern, Jägern und anderen Beamten gern gekaufter Revolver. Kal. 320 = 7 mm. Stück Mk. 10.—

Nr. 7926. Modell „Forstbegleiter“.
genau wie Modell 7925, jedoch Kal. 320 = 8 mm. Stück Mk. 10.50

Nr. 7731. Revolverpatrone
(Kal. 320 = 7 mm, mit Kugel).
1 Schachtel mit 50 Stück Mk. 2.—

Nr. 7933. Hammerleß-Revolver.
Kal. 320 = 7 mm, mit eingeschraubtem gezogenen Stahllauf, Drehverschiebung an der Seite, mit Entlastung zum Drehen, Abzug zum Einlegen, gepolte Hornschalen mit feiner Fischhaut. Alle Teile sind fein schwarz eloxiert, sowie in jeder Beziehung tadellos und sauber ausgearbeitet. Als zuverlässiger, handlicher und bequemer Taschenrevolver ganz besonders zu empfehlen. Stück Mk. 14.—

Unzählige hewillige Anerkennungen sprechen für volle Bedienung.

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Meine Firma liefert eine nur erstklassige Qualität.



by culture? In his standard reference work *The History of Emotions*, historian Jan Plamper addressed this topic extensively, often on the basis of neurobiological findings. “Emotions are hybrid, they are bio-physiological, and they are conditioned by time,” says Dagmar Ellerbrock.

One of the challenges of the new project on shooting sprees will be finding suitable sources that can provide information about the emotional state of the perpetrators. In contrast to the topic of “gun boys,” there are very few historical witnesses, says Ellerbrock regretfully. “In terms of sources, the topic of shooting sprees is a very difficult one.” Many of the perpetrators didn’t even leave a suicide note behind.

“The problem is that, instead, many things are ascribed to them from outside.” This, in turn, can contribute to the stylization of the negative “hero” who, however, from a sociological and historical perspective, is just one of many players in a complex event. Some propitious finds in the historical record and enough time for research – these are the favorable conditions Dagmar Ellerbrock now hopes to have for the new sub-project.

Historical sources on shooting sprees are a difficult matter. Dagmar Ellerbrock (right) and her colleagues Natalia Marcelo (left) and Charlotte Piepenbrock are hoping to find more texts than just those that focus on the perpetrators. Their interest in the topic isn’t purely academic in nature; they believe that the findings absolutely could contribute to a more peaceful society.

She already demonstrates impartiality in dealing with a complex issue, many aspects of which are taboo. Another force that drives her is the certainty that findings regarding the potential desirability of physical violence and the use of weapons to cope with negative emotions can ultimately contribute to a

more peaceful society: “Our research doesn’t pursue purely academic interests, but also, and primarily, social ones,” she says. Because only by considering the entire spectrum of emotions that can arise in the context of violent acts – before, during and after – will we have a chance to counteract them. ◀

TO THE POINT

- Biological aspects of emotions have been a subject of neuroscience for a few years, but emotions are also shaped and conditioned by culture. One department at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin is addressing the “History of Emotions.”
- In the Minerva project “Emotions, Violence and Peace,” headed by historian Dagmar Ellerbrock, the researchers look at, among other things, the historically changing emotions in dealing with weapons.
- In the 19th century, for instance, the possession of weapons was considered to be an expression of maturing manhood and strength. Around the turn to the 20th century, however, although the emotions and customs of young men didn’t change, the potential danger of the new weapons did.
- The First World War influenced Germans’ attitudes toward weapons.
- In the Minerva project, one of the researchers’ aims is to study the interplay between all players in the modern, media-influenced phenomenon of killing sprees by youth and young men.

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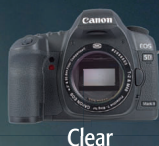
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